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Summary Report:
Effects of Broadband Connectivity in the Rwandan Tourism Sector

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This summary is for **<u>personal use only</u>**. A full report and policy brief will be published in September 2014.

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a) Introduction

East Africa was the world's last major region without submarine fibre-optic broadband Internet access, and until the summer of 2009 had been forced to rely on slow and costly satellite connections for access. However, the region has recently been connected via fibre-optic cable, in theory, allowing much greater speeds at much lower prices.

This rapid transformation in the region's connectivity has prompted politicians, journalists, academics, and citizens to speak of an ICT-fuelled economic revolution happening on the continent. While some research has been conducted into the impacts of ICTs on economic processes and practices, there remains surprisingly little research into changing connectivity in East Africa.

Here we summarise research examining the effects of this changing connectivity in the Rwandan tourism sector. We seek to understand what impacts changing connectivity is having, who benefits and who doesn't.

b) Connectivity

Tourism is a sector where connectivity and the internet have been discussed as having the potential to have significant impact. However there has been little research done on how the internet has impacted developed country tourism destinations like Rwanda. This research drew on 59 in-depth interviews to examine internet and ICT use in this context.

Connectivity can support **inputs (that is tourism resources and sights)**. Online visibility allows locations to be presented to the rest of the world. Skills and knowledge development can enhance the presentation of those resources and can also be done online. At the moment, skills development is mainly done offline in Rwanda through workshops and thus only particularly motivated actors tended to access online knowledge.

Business functioning has been improved through the availability of online connectivity, where organisational logistics become easier to handle by Rwandan firms, improving trust between firms.

Whilst Rwandan firms have looked to push towards **distribution** of tour resources and **direct marketing to customers**, the successes of Rwandan firms has been limited. This relates to competition of outbound firms, and the difficulties in negotiating the diverse range of websites, social media sites and other resources. It takes time and skill to understand how best to use these resources.

Changing connectivity has had impact on tourism. In Rwanda firms realise the importance of the internet in communication, and adoption is high. Yet, there is still room for further development through undertaking more strategic activity and better understanding of the available tools.

c) Opportunities

There were many examples of innovative activity observed in Rwanda which point to opportunities for better use of connectivity. However, often these were activities only undertaken by one of two firms in the sector. Sharing these innovative activities could thus lead to wider improvement:

Online destination management

Destination management is still important. It provides visibility and information for tourists who are often not clear about where they want to go, and what they want to do. Online destination management should include ensure extensive information on tourism elements – the natural resources, cultural tours and activities that are possible. This is crucial as Rwanda looks to diversify the range of available attractions to tourists beyond only Gorilla and wildlife tourism.

Destination management is also about having more than just one single website. It is about how a bundle of complex cultural and geographic information about a tourist destination reaches customers. This information is as likely to come from 'pushes' and generating interest in social networks and other online applications as it does from 'pulls' of customer searching for information and visiting websites. The successful case of "Kwita Iznia" (Gorilla naming ceremony) shows it is possible for more interactive 'push' approaches to work in Rwanda. It could therefore be fruitful to look at how other existing activities might be best promoted.

Online knowledge

Although online learning resources have not been used much yet in Rwanda, the production of such resources could be valuable in areas where the sector is looking for improvements. Online learning resources would be particularly useful in jobs where staff turn-over is frequent and attending workshops is less viable. This is especially the case with activities like customer services and with basic management skills in tourism.

Support internal systems and management development

Coherent internal information systems and skilled management are the fulcrum of more dynamic firms in the tourism sector, and improve the ability for firms to use online resources and services. Adoption is likely to be driven by better managerial training in tourism, something that already occurring in the sector through active government support. Further activities could also push improvements. For instance, promoting knowledge building through hotel and tour associations, and visits to places of best practice might inspire improvement for these firms.

Youth and social media

Social media use in Rwandan firms is sometimes seen by managers as a time-sink or as being overly complex. Yet, it is an increasingly important online resource - in how customer find, share and decide on tourism experiences.

There is a tendency for tourism firms in Rwanda to outsource social media activity to external consultants, for which they are often overcharged and where they lose direct interaction with/through these vital resources. Using social media relies on interest, time, and keeping up

with the newest developments. With successful examples in mind, it would be prudent for hotels and tour operators to reach out to young employees.

As has been done successfully in a few firms, employing a tech-savvy young staff member as a social media co-ordinator can often be done for a relatively low cost, and can allow firms to build social media benefits and skills in-house.

Branding and niche approaches online

Going online is often not a matter of reaching 'more of the same' customers. Firms who strategize and then push to reach specific demographics or targeted segments of customer were generally found to be more successful.

There were successful cases of firms who strategically push into niche areas (i.e bird watching, community tourism, and regional customers) and were successful. Online activities are a crucial element of such approaches – in looking for niches and ensuring that niches reach a critical mass of customers.

Similarly, for growing Rwandan firms, expansion may not necessarily come through offering extra itineraries and gaining more customers of the same type. Cross branding for different demographics (for instance, by language, by budget) can allow different types of growth. Given the low awareness of such approaches it is crucial that these ideas are also linked into training and skills development

Continue to support internet access within hotels

RDB has taken positive steps to push internet access in hotels and support problems when they have occurred. This support has been useful to improving tourist impressions of quality of hotels in Rwanda. It has also contributed to allowing tourists to interact online when they are travelling, and this can push online visibility of the country. As demands of connectivity grow, attention on access should be maintained to ensure that hotels keep up with the needs of customers and bandwidth intensive online resources.

d) Summary

Many firms in the tourism sector have adopted and are actively using better connectivity in a positive way and this is having impact on the sector.

Now that better connectivity is available, the goal should be to tackle secondary barriers to effective use of connectivity to drive improved benefits. Support, particularly around skills and how to best use the growing mass of available technologies in tourism is now vital.